

The Cultural Work of Teacher Education

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Abstract

Engaging teacher education as cultural work positions teacher educators and pre-service teachers as cultural workers. Cultural workers foreground the cultural complexities of their situated experiences while aiming to produce cultures that transform prevailing inequalities and injustices in public education. Doctoral students are also cultural workers translating the world of academia and their role in it as they learn to educate teacher candidates. How doctoral candidates engage in this cultural work depends greatly on the degree to which their faculty mentors are able to reveal the contradictions and opportunities for expansive learning that co-exist within schools of education and individual departments such as curriculum and learning. This paper looks at this conundrum from the perspectives of a doctoral student and a senior faculty member.

Keywords: cultural workers, teacher education, disabilities, disproportionality

The Cultural Work of Teacher Education

Teachers need preparation to understand and respond to the cultural dynamics that mediate learning and social relationships in their classrooms. Their ability to do so affects how they interpret the social and academic interactions between themselves and their students as well as between students (Kozleski, Artiles, McCray, & Lacy, 2014). For instance, the decision to refer a child for additional help, assessment, and services such as special education begins with teachers' understanding of learning as cultural practice (McDermott, 1993; McDermott & Varenne, 1995). This is an urgent need in an educational system that continues to use special education as a tool to sort children who challenge teachers' skills and understanding of how sociocultural backgrounds, language, and experience alter assumptions about the tacit knowledge that students bring to the classroom (Kozleski, Artiles, & Skrtic, 2014). Researchers have highlighted the relationship between cultures in classrooms and the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students in relationship to who is referred and identified for special education (Artiles, Kozleski, & Waitoller, 2011; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2016). While two recent publications offer evidence that questions the degree to which racial disproportionality exist within special education, a number of scholars in the area concur that recent research is flawed (Skiba et al, 2016). Disproportionate representation of students of color and other unrepresented groups remains a critical benchmark for assessing whether US schools are successful for some or all students.

Erickson (2010) reminded us that “everything in education relates to culture... Culture is in us, and all around us... In its scope and distribution, it is personal, familial, communal, institutional, social, and global (p. 35). Culture undergirds teachers' daily practice decisions and capacities to proactively address structural and historical inequities embedded in classroom

politics, curriculum, and educational scripts. We define culture mindful of the role that culture plays in mediating our everyday activity. Schafer (1998) describes culture in the following way:

[Culture is] an organic and dynamic whole which is concerned with the way people see and interpret the world, organize themselves, conduct their affairs, elevate and enrich life, and position themselves in the work [through} complex interrelationships that comprise the domain of culture... (p. 42).

Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) remind us that culture exists in the participation practices of specific cultural communities such as teacher education communities. This idea draws on the work of cultural psychology which is concerned with the ways that psychological processes emerge through participation in activity (Cole, 1996).

To teach for social justice and equity means that teachers must be conscious of the sediments of cultural-historical contexts that layer their work with students. Some teachers who adopt this approach to their work become culturally conscious through their interaction with their students, life in their communities, and observations about the utility of mainstream, prescribed curriculum. However, many teachers in the US are unaware of the ways in which culture saturates their daily practice in spite of the fact that they embody cultural practice (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The cultural mismatches between how teachers teach and how their students are prepared to learn are increasingly indexed in achievement gaps between among children from different ethnic and racial groups and, increasingly, English learners (Aud et al., 2011).

Preservice teachers have been described as cultural workers in the making (Ashton, 2013). They engage in educational practices and pedagogies within a specific historical, sociocultural context. Teacher preparation programs should be an important site for the development of a critical

consciousness of culture's role in teaching and learning. Such programs require faculty who are well versed in this work.

While the notion that classroom teachers are cultural workers is established in some circles (Freire, 1998), preparing doctoral students to educate cultural workers is under theorized. Indeed, the cultural worker identity may be unfamiliar as a role for teacher educators. As cultural workers, teacher educators create spaces for pre-service teachers to understand, engage and respond to their students' cultural contexts through the design and development of lessons that connect students' lived experiences to the standards and curriculum (Gutierrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009; Lee, 2007). Therefore, we explore how doctoral students are equipped for their roles as faculty who prepare teachers to work in public schools. Further, we examine how doctoral students can understand issues of race, power and privilege through their courses of study and the impact of these understandings on how they approach their teaching, research, and service commitments. Finally, we theorize ways in which doctoral students are socialized into their roles as researchers and faculty that prepare future teachers, in contested spaces of power and privilege ubiquitous in learning and teaching processes. Through this analysis, we hope to reframe the preparation of the next generation of teacher educators.

In subsequent sections, we insert our own teacher education experiences as examples of the points that we make. Exposing our own perspectives is central to our argument that teachers are encultured in teacher preparation programs to be mute about difference and intersectional notions of identity and practice. This begins with the blinders that constrain how faculty understand the role of culture and cultural practice in referral practices that shift students from general to special education services. Our perspectives, as a doctoral student and a professor, offer ways in which to think about the design, purpose and politics of pre-service teacher

education in higher education contexts fraught with socio-cultural, historical complexities that are often left unexamined.

Navigating the Cultural Shoals: Views from Multiple Perspectives

As cultural workers we reveal behavioral and discourse patterns that organize classrooms, schools and social systems into specific kinds of cultural enclaves. These enclaves have particular distributions of power and influence that benefit some students while minoritizing others such as students with dis/abilities, who speak languages other than English (in the US), and who identify as Black, Latino, American Indian or mixed race. Our stories highlight points of entry into pre-service teacher education. They also highlight pivotal moments in our professional journeys where we crossed boundaries and engaged in the process of becoming aware of ourselves as cultural workers (Roth & Tobin, 2002). Our narratives contextualize the theoretical implications of being and becoming cultural workers who are socialized as faculty that prepare future teachers.

A Cultural Construction Zone

Freire (2002) imagined critical scholars as those who set out to ‘refine and develop critical pedagogy attentive to the changing face of social, cultural, gender and global relations’, as cultural workers problematizing ‘relationships between power and pedagogy’ (ix). This requires understanding divergent, but ubiquitous cultural practices, discourses and identities that dominate cultural spaces. They may be invisible to members of any given cultural space including schools and classrooms (Brown, 2000). Giroux (1992) introduced border pedagogy which acknowledges borders and their margins through which culture, power, and knowledge shift. Margins can create borders that isolate and marginalize or alternatively transform and

emancipate by shaping identities and (re)organizing the distribution of power. Tami's experience as she returned to Sri Lanka, her home, from her master's program brings this notion into focus:

Having returned home with undergraduate and graduate degrees from the US, I was satisfied with the work I did. Yet troubling realities surfaced because of discourses of power and privilege entrenched in the fabric of my country's historical, and sociocultural context, a post-colonial island-nation recovering from a devastating civil war. My own positioning within these disparate and discursive discourses which centered and decentered ethnicity, socioeconomic status and gender, impacted me and my work as I navigated tenuous spaces of power and privilege. My identity was formed in part because I was a women educated in the US, of mixed ethnicity, from a middle class upbringing, working in under resourced schools. Particularly, my work as a teacher educator and my outsider education often privileged me. Indeed, I leveraged the status afforded to me as a local educated in the West. Reconciling and constructively building on my disparate but valuable experiences both here in the US and Sri Lanka to advance teacher education drove me toward pursuing a Ph.D. The dissonance I experienced through practice began to modulate once I began my doctoral work which stimulated critical reflection and set me on the path of becoming a cultural worker.

Akkerman and Bakker (2011) noted that learning involves engaging with boundaries that mark socio-cultural differences. Crossing boundaries across multiple sites entail learning processes that function as resources for the 'development of intersecting identities and practices' (p.132). Boundary crossing socializes cultural workers into multiple vernaculars, since sites present multiple histories, repertoires and capabilities (Wenger, 1998). Tami notes how her own development as a cultural worker was inspired by her experiences:

Upon returning home, I focused on implementing practices I learned in the US. In order to improve engagement, I remember instructing teachers to implement circle time. Regrettably, nearly 50 students sat in a circle in the scorching heat, dreading being called upon by teachers demanding answers to circle time prompts, came in tow. Although I had persuaded teachers to follow my instructions, I did not consider the *interventions*' impact on a context where classrooms are overcrowded and giving a *wrong* answer invites harsh punishment. Perhaps more importantly, I did not consider *if* this intervention was necessary. It was puzzling how teachers followed my instructions with prescription-like accuracy, without altering typical classroom practices. Similar experiences cautioned me that importing practice without meaning and context was problematic.

Teacher educators and doctoral faculty may be aware of institutional and cultural boundaries that both curtail and extend teaching and learning trajectories but these are too rarely made transparent to their students. For example, doctoral students who are learning to teach teacher candidates may transfer their own experience of teaching children in P-12 settings to teaching adults in college without considering how adult learners and their histories mediate their own learning and practice as new teachers. As doctoral students absorb academia's cultural practices, their new knowledge and discourse tools may be invigorating but also uncomfortable. For instance, critiquing practices in schools that they were once part of create liminal spaces seemingly betray former loyalties. Without considering the consequences of such practices, damage to trust and collegiality across university and school settings may occur. Doctoral students in teacher education are border crossers as are assistant professors, as Elizabeth notes in her own history:

It wasn't until I had been a faculty member for three or four years that I started thinking about the different kinds of influences that teacher educators had on the P-12 schools that they partnered with to support teacher learning. Up to that point, I had been concerned with the progression of the teacher education curriculum and how knowledge for and in action needed to be scaffolded (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Early on, I realized that teaching theory without context meant that teacher candidates were likely to create mental parking lots to organize their personal theories about how children learn. The parking lot knowledge was likely to be separate from knowledge-in-action that guides our everyday performance. This idea shifted a boundary in my own thinking, moving practice in my mind from an individual to a community activity and changed where I wanted to do my work.

Border crossing requires knowledge, skills and agility, and a willingness to embrace an expansive view of learning that is situated in socio-cultural, historical contexts (Engeström, 1987). At times, cultural workers are at an impasse, unable to cross boundaries due to methodological or conceptual differences in practice orientations. Third spaces offer an array of alternatives to organize learning (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopes & Tajeda, 1999). Tami invokes memories of her first year of her doctoral experience and the various impasses she experienced:

Before beginning my doctorate, my experiences fell squarely within the framework of a received knower (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule 1986). As a learner, I considered myself a recipient of knowledge, relying on experts to disseminate an objective, correct way to think and act, then unquestioningly transferred that knowledge through teaching. Shifts in my pedagogical stance came in unanticipated ways. Instead of an exegesis of a comprehensive teacher education curriculum, shifts

entailed an expedition designed to transform me. Mostly my advisers helped me unshackle former dispositions, focusing on whom I needed *become* in order to do this work. Shifts were also supported by carefully designed coursework, research, teaching and service opportunities which helped me identify and cross boundaries created by me and for me (Akkerman & Barker, 2011; Roth & Tobin, 2002). For instance, some doctoral faculty signaled that they expected me to foreground the US system and dominant culture. But others, through coursework, ongoing discussion, and mentoring helped me to understand how I needed to foreground my own experiences to build more complete theoretical and conceptual frameworks for educating teachers. I was becoming a cultural worker by engaging in boundary work with other cultural workers, creating spaces of critical reflection.

Third spaces expand learning by innovating practices and processes that are conducive to embracing diversity, with a keen eye toward improving equity in education. In creating these spaces, cultural workers understand the fundamental leitmotif that they do not merely co-construct knowledge, but also produce cultures in which many ways of knowing are valued. Those third spaces can arise in small study groups or specializations where a group of faculty and students meet regularly to share readings, ongoing writing, and discuss issues that they face elsewhere in their practice. Third spaces constitute a way to practice reflection on their decisions and assumptions lest they create and perpetuate the very inequitable realities which they resist (Giroux, 2012; McLaren, 2016). Doctoral students are engaged in cultural work from the moment they begin their programs.

Cultural workers function as arbitrators who recognize that teaching is a process of mediating between diverse cultural histories and present culturally bound experiences (Holland,

Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998; Giroux, 1992). Therefore, every person involved in the pedagogic process regardless of their diverse positions is unconditionally a full member of the learning community (Wenger, 1998). Cultural workers (faculty and doctoral students alike) trouble the asymmetrical power relationships within and outside their unique sites. Power asymmetries are pervasive in academia where hegemonic, dominant discourses are engraved into the curriculum, research agendas, funding mechanisms, faculty selection, mentoring of graduate students and in institutional traditions. Invariably these asymmetries bleed into preparing teachers. Tami notes that her journey required transgressing:

With support and encouragement from faculty and my peer group, I transgressed to position myself as a cultural worker. I embraced and critically engaged with my situated experiences, those that drove me to pursue doctoral work in the first place. I also crossed structural borders created for me, by no longer privileging psychology, applied behavior analysis inscribed within the historical legacies of special education. Instead, I progressed past notions of learning based on disability categories to viewing learning as an expansive cultural practice (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Coursework within and outside of the School of Education were formative in this journey. My advisors expected me to engage in extensive interdisciplinary work. As a result, I began to conceptualize how learning operates in post-war contexts where most students could be easily (mis)labeled with multiple disabilities by locating deficits caused by war and its aftermath within children, effectively eliminating their already minimal educational opportunities. In the Sri Lankan context, disability labels accurate or otherwise permit students to be pushed out of public education. This reformulation prompted me to work

toward establishing inclusive education systems instead of dis/ability specific segregated programs (Skrtic, 1995) as I had done before.

Graduate teaching assistants who design and teach courses for pre-service teachers, often mediate contentious spaces where department tradition may contradict a supervisor's teaching philosophy. As cultural workers who mediate and transgress, they are made aware of their own positioning and how their presence in multiple sites influences outcomes. Critical pedagogy insists on sensitivity to how pedagogic practices silence and marginalize individuals (Giroux, 1992; Lee, 2007). The processes of silencing and marginalizing coerce or persuade individuals to assimilate to norms and traditions of a discipline or institution in order to be accepted. Unfortunately, these processes erect barriers in engagement, inhibit meaningful learning opportunities and restrain achievement. Therefore, understanding teacher education at both the faculty and doctoral student level is imperative in order to make navigating boundaries visible and explicit while at the same time engaging in continuous processes of creating third spaces. In essence, these new spaces enable all those involved in the process of learning to become cultural workers.

Dangers Within

Doctoral work is an initiation into an academic career, where significant time and resources are invested in preparing doctoral students to become future teacher educators. The passage from being an educator in the P-12 context to a teacher educator is an indeterminate process. While some processes are recognizable and immediate, others are subtle and gradual. For instance, being positioned as a researcher is obvious and immediate through coursework, while the formation of epistemological underpinnings that determine the type of research undertaken is more gradual and subtle. The process of becoming teacher educators is a process of

boundary crossing much more than transitioning. This requires novice teacher educators to shape and reshape their identities as learners within academia, while simultaneously repositioning their identities as educators of future teachers. As a result, teacher educators constantly remap their understanding of who they are and the work they are called to do, whom they teach, and what those they teach must be prepared to do (Boyd & Harris, 2010; Sleeter & Grant, 1994).

Elizabeth offers an example of that journey from her own experience:

Siloed knowledge and its use is a single loop, selecting a process to fit the need (e.g., doing things right). A double loop performance requires the teacher to select and perform the best strategy *given the context* (e.g., doing the right things). A triple loop performance would require knowing an array of strategies to use, assessing the context to select the best fit, and asking if the solution met the best outcomes (e.g., how do we know what the right things are). New teachers tend to be consumed with first loop learning. More experienced teachers with second loop issues. Moving from second to third loop problems is difficult to manage since the contexts of teaching are so saturated with technical pointers about how to teach rather than deeper questions about how to engage learning.

When teacher candidates become conscious of culture, looking at practice through the lens of culture cracks knowledge reproduction. As Tami tells us in her next excerpt, if students expect their teachers to punish incorrect responses, they may not recognize an intended scaffold and not respond to it. Or, in more overtly color-conscious ways, a student minoritized by the color of her skin might not expect a White teacher to offer support (Ballenger, 1992). Most doctoral students come out of their own teacher practice still working on single and double loop problem solving. It's not until they get to triple loop thinking that they begin to work on triple

loop problems like why disproportionality is such a pervasive and chronic problem in education systems.

Since novice teacher educators are experienced in P-12 settings, they are socialized into the normative practices of public school teaching. They can readily convey content to future teachers by drawing on recent, direct experience. However, doctoral coursework introduces critical pedagogy that problematizes those recent educational practices. Doctoral students, like Tami, experience this bind between sharing knowledge and skills that are instrumentally useful while scaffolding a critical analysis of the knowledge and skills we teach. She explained:

Becoming a cultural worker requires engaging in persistent struggle and temerity, especially as a junior doctoral student. The normative boundaries within special education at times required unflinching loyalty to its venerated discourses (Darder, 2011), and when resisted positioned my shifting proclivities as instability instead of becoming. I experienced this during my graduate teaching experiences, where I as a women of color invited pre-service teachers to embark on a journey of becoming cultural workers. I modeled being a cultural worker by crossing and even transgressing boundaries, as modeled to me by my advisers by creating alternative spaces that contend with the difficult realities of teaching in times of historically established educational inequality. For instance, we addressed the disproportional representation of minority students in Special Education head on in our classes while recognizing the multiple often-paradoxical theoretical and empirical perspectives offered in this regard (Artiles, Kozleski & Waitoller, 2012; Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2011). As a result, we embraced the socio-cultural, historical realities of our experiences as different (not deficient), by

critically engaging our dispositions based on who we are, whom we teach and why we teach (Zeichner, 1999).

This kind of teaching requires polish. Content must be presented in ways that introduce critical thinking. For instance, helping teacher candidates understand the problem of over representation of minority students in special education requires skill in being aware of the issues that arise from locating root causes within individuals and their communities. The years of being socialized in teaching practice where critical thinking is often absent creates disjuncture in our own thinking. As we grow and develop as scholars, it becomes increasingly clear that the theories we know, understand and are required to teach need to be situated within a deep understanding of the context in which we teach. It is often uncomfortable and overwhelming. As we unshackle ourselves from receiving knowledge, we must also resist positioning our future teachers as received knowers. In pursuit of inquiry and discovery, both teacher educators and pre-service teachers are in the process of crossing borders (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Rodriguez, 2001), as Elizabeth notes here:

I worked on the problem of connecting theory and practice for a long time as an instrumental problem that could be solved by linking theory, research evidence, and practice through the proper organization of the curriculum. Many teacher educators continue to work on the instrumental problem because it seems to be the impediment to the professionalization of teaching. The dominant US view is that expert performance is a hallmark of professionalism in the age of New Capitalism (Kozleski, Artiles, & Skrtic, 2014; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2015). Expert performance arises from available evidence produced by the research community, amplified by repeated practice across contexts. It is situated in complex, individual decision making that gauges the context and rapidly

produces refined responses that conform to an approved standard of practice. A focus on skill and technique has a number of advantages for the education enterprise because it produces standardized protocols for practice that in many instances result in the acquisition of sets of preferred skills such as demonstration of mastery within the common core. By focusing on this kind of single and double loop knowledge acquisition and standards of practice, teacher education programs can graduate teachers who are able to teach in normative contexts and produce learning results for their students. But, this kind of approach to preparing teachers to teach and conceptions about the role and function of teaching ignore the reciprocal relationship between students and teachers in the cultural exchange inherent in learning (Cole, 2005; Lee, 2007; Rogoff, 2003). The connection between disproportionality in special education and normative practices is exemplified in the work of Harry and Klingner (2014).

As teacher educators who understand their roles as cultural workers, we make visible our vulnerabilities and strengths in the process of becoming. The role of modeling the dispositions of a cultural worker cannot be over emphasized. Our doctoral faculty must do this for doctoral students as well. Positioning ourselves as cultural workers, while encouraging students to become cultural workers themselves open up many possibilities to engage in a learning processes that present skills and knowledge based on solid academic rigor, while ensuring that these skills and knowledge are applicable and critical. For example, the ways in which we design and present course content, how we moderate difficult conversations (e.g., disproportionality) and provide meaningful feedback can establish creative, authentic spaces where teacher educators and future teachers can be engaged in the process of co-constructing knowledge that constantly seeks to dismantle inequities in the P-12 context.

The Way Forward

The mentoring role of faculty plays an important role in modeling the behaviors and habits of thinking that are important to cultural workers. While the asymmetrical power structures between the faculty and doctoral students are acknowledged, faculty need not resign themselves to the practices that maintain and perpetuate asymmetries such as disproportionality further (Nieto, 2000). Instead, faculty have the power to establish relationships with their doctoral students in ways that make visible their own journey in academia and their situated experiences that influenced who they are now and who they will become. This transparency, allows doctoral students to trace their own trajectories as they engage in the process of becoming cultural workers.

Disproportionality, rooted as it is, in specific understandings of what special education is and the tools that mediate its practice, is a contested space. It represents a way of thinking and understanding human capabilities that focus on the insufficiencies of individuals in the face of social and practice contexts, like schools and classrooms. Reframing the problem space requires careful research to understand the contexts and orientations to the field and bring new frameworks and approaches to contextualizing difference and disabling contexts. Changing orientations to how problem spaces are located, requires changing fundamental assumptions about locating where learning and practice develops. Doctoral programs are an essential link to linking new ways of thinking to new forms of practice through teacher education. Emerging teacher educators need to participate in the reconstruction of how we think about difference, disability, and the practice of teaching. Strong models of faculty as cultural workers, enable doctoral students as faculty who prepare future teachers to emulate these practices and offer

multiple meaningful opportunities for pre-service teachers to carve out their own teaching practices in ways that are responsive to their own contexts.

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